

Coates contra mundum

In 1963, James Baldwin, aged thirty-nine, published the open letter to his nephew, aged fifteen, that forms the first part of *The Fire Next Time*. In 2015, Ta-Nehisi Coates, aged thirty-nine, published an open letter to his son, aged fifteen, titled *Between the World and Me*.¹ The book is Coates's *The Fire Next Time*.

To use a sample of two is not, of course, in any sense a scientific way to measure the change in relations between black and white in America, or in the condition of whom Baldwin in those days had no hesitation in calling "the Negro"; but it seems to me that no such scientific way really exists, and that if we could say only what could be scientifically proved we should soon be reduced to silence. This is not quite the same, however, as saying that the subject is beyond rational discussion: but such are the emotions and the posturing that it calls forth that cool and rational discussion is rare.

Are things, *grosso modo*, better or worse now for blacks than in 1963? The very question is that posed by Ralph Ellison in his description in *Invisible Man*, published in 1952, of his protagonist's reaction to the statue of the founder of the state college for Negroes:

his hands outstretched in the breathtaking gesture of lifting a veil that flutters in hard, metallic folds above the face of a kneeling slave; and I am standing puzzled, unable to decide whether the veil really is being lifted, or lowered more firmly in place; whether I am witnessing a revelation or a more efficient blinding.

Have there been, then, two steps forward and one back, or one forward and two back?

Personally, I don't have much doubt about this: scenes such as the *battle royal* with which Ellison's novel opens, and in which ten young black men are blindfolded and told to box one another, the winner being the last man standing, all for the coarse amusement of drunken, sated, white satyrs, the wealthy dignitaries of the town, including judges and doctors, are not only no longer possible but are now *unthinkable*. Objectively, therefore, there has been progress: but, as Baldwin implicitly pointed out when he wrote that "until lately, [Negroes] have allowed themselves to feel so little hatred" towards whites, the strength of emotions such as hatred are not necessarily proportional to their supposed occasion, but rather to disappointed expectations and perhaps to personal needs. There is little doubt, either, that the expression of strong feeling can be a career advantage in politics and journalism: I used to write for a newspaper of vast circulation that rigorously excluded nuance, so that I was able to write for it only on those few subjects on which I had the most uncompromising views. My insistence on seeing more than one side to a question lost me quite a few lucrative commissions.

Baldwin writes, with commendable honesty:

In a society that is entirely hostile, and, by its nature, seems determined to cut you down . . . it begins to be almost impossible to distinguish real from fancied injury. One can very quickly cease to attempt this distinction, and, what is worse, one usually ceases to attempt it without realizing that one has done so.

The distinction between real and fancied injury is a crucial one, of course, for fighting chimeras is not merely a waste of time and effort but positively destructive of all that is valuable in life. Just as paranoia eliminates that important distinction, so the incentives to emotional entrepreneurialism blur the distinction between real and simulated emotion, and veil the distinction from the phoney himself. Anger is not its

own justification—there is no Cartesian syllogism in moral philosophy, “I’m angry, therefore I’m right”—and any honest person will admit that there is a seductive pleasure in anger. I have mistrusted my own rage ever since, as a student of physiology, I saw a cat stimulated to insensate rage by the discharge of electrodes in its amygdala.

The differences and similarities between Baldwin and Coates are both interesting and instructive. For example, both grew up in the ghetto, Baldwin in Harlem and Coates in Baltimore. In Baldwin’s case, though, his most significant experience of violence (at least as recounted in his book) was that of being beaten as a ten-year-old by two policemen, presumably white, an experience that would have a lasting effect on anybody, and which it would require a certain mental heroism to put into a calm perspective. Coates’s early experience of violence, by contrast, was of that committed by blacks in Baltimore: but, by means of history and sociology, he exonerates them entirely from their responsibility for their acts. Speaking of the high murder rate of young blacks by other young blacks, he writes:

The killing fields of Chicago, of Baltimore, of Detroit, were created by the policy of Dreamers [his name for those who see anything positive in American history], but their weight, their shame, rests solely upon those who are dying in them. And there is a great deception in this. To yell “black on black crime” is to shoot a man and then shame him for bleeding.

There is a kind of moral blackmail at work here: to mention the rather obvious fact that young black men in the ghetto are now much more likely to be killed or otherwise seriously victimized by their peers than by the police, however reprehensibly the latter may sometimes behave, is *ipso facto* to yell, in other words be irrational in a particular and politically offensive way. According to Coates in another passage, even to speak of violence done to blacks by other

blacks is to do "violence to language." Rather than yell, then, it is best to keep quiet on the subject, to pass over it in silence or, better still, fail even to notice it. And this, be it remembered, is a recommendation to his son.

Coates fails to notice that his blanket exoneration of the perpetrators actually dehumanizes them. On his view, when the young perpetrators pull the trigger or thrust the knife in they are only vectors of forces, not agents with purposes, desires, plans, or motives. Therefore they are not really men at all, so that, ironically enough, they become for him *Invisible Man* writ large.

Neither Baldwin nor Coates is a systematic thinker, but of the two Baldwin shows a much greater propensity to genuine self-examination and a far more generous spirit. This is not to say that he does not sometimes, in his justified anger, exaggerate or overstate his case; but he acknowledges, if not an awareness of having done so, at least some degree of ambiguity. The two authors share more or less the same historiography, namely that the history of America is that of enslavement, oppression, rapine, exploitation, cruelty, humiliation, despoliation, mainly but not exclusively directed at the black man, *and nothing else*, and that it has continued undiminished, more or less, to the present day. But while Baldwin is perfectly content to indulge in the grossest generalizations—for example "there is certainly nothing in the white man's public or private life that one should desire to imitate," as if all the millions and millions of white men had been more or less identical in both—he leavens these preposterous generalizations with insights and sometimes, even, with patriotic sentiments, for example telling his nephew that "great men have done great things here" [in America] (note: I had said "his son" in the print version of this essay). Discussing the black nationalism that was fashionable in his day, and that demanded an apartheid solution to the race problem, he says that the nationalists

“will be forced to surrender many things that [they] now scarcely know that [they] have.” In other words, there is always a tendency to take what we have for granted and focus only on what we lack and that to which we think we are entitled. This way of looking at the world is a recipe for permanent resentment.

Not, of course, that Coates would mind this very much; indeed it seems to be his goal to instill resentment into his son whom he fears might otherwise grow up so comfortably, thanks to America’s current appetite for self-excoriation to which his book so shrewdly appeals and which provides him with such a good living. “White America’s progress was built on looting and violence,” he tells his son, without mentioning the vigor, the drive, the enterprise, the inventiveness, the scientific research, and the political institutions other than slavery that so self-evidently and vitally contributed to that progress, and without which no amount of looting or slavery would have led to such unprecedented wealth. Brazil was a slave country twenty-five years longer than America, and indeed the destination of 40 percent of the slaves taken from Africa, but it achieved nothing like the wealth as a result.

When Coates tells his son “Never forget that for 250 years black people were born into chains,” he does not dilate on what, exactly, he means by “Never forget.” There is more than one possible interpretation of the phrase. In the context of the whole book, I think it means “Keep it always in the forefront of your mind,” rather than never forget it in the sense of not being able to remember what you had for dinner seventeen days ago. While it is perfectly right, and indeed vitally important, that historical memory should be available to anyone who wants to interpret the modern world, for without it history becomes nothing but a series of unconnected moments, neither should it be a distorting lens through which everything and everybody is seen. My mother was a refugee from Nazi Germany, and while she never forgot it—how could she?—in

the sense of remaining able to call it to mind, she did not interpret all her subsequent problems in the light of that catastrophic experience, even though it had obviously changed her life course in a very fundamental way. She didn't think that a rude shop assistant was a Nazi.

On the evidence of this book Coates wants to raise up in his son an ideological resentment, to querulous monomania. He repeatedly extols what he calls the "struggle," though he does not tell his son what it is a struggle *for*. He makes explicit his disbelief in the likelihood of real change, given that America is ruled by what he so elegantly calls "majoritarian pigs," so that it cannot be for any concrete or tangible political or economic goal. There is not a single call to his son to expand his horizons beyond "the struggle," which is really that of giving a meaning to life in the absence of any other. Of course, it is also (potentially) a lucrative career: but while Coates sees the economic beam in everybody else's eye, he does not see the financial mote in his own. He has successfully commodified his dissent, to adapt slightly the title of Thomas Frank's book. It does not occur to him that, even in America, outrage cannot be the way forward for millions of people, or indeed that dwelling exclusively on injustice, real or supposed, may not be the best advice to an adolescent (adolescence being, in any case, the great age of resentment).

In every line, on every page, the mind-forg'd manacles I hear. Coates does not tell his son to be a plumber, an entomologist, or a paleographer if he wants: in a curious mirror-image of white bigotry, he seeks to enclose him in the world of "black studies." The only non-black author whom he claims as an influence is Basil Davidson, the upper-class British communist sympathizer who, before he turned Africanist, wrote a book extolling Tito just before he killed half a million people at least, and another extolling Mao just before the Great Leap Forward that caused about thirty million deaths. Indeed,

Davidson (a very pleasant man) was like the literary Fifth Horseman of the Apocalypse. After he turned his very capacious mind to Africa (he was a brilliant linguist), he managed to find in Guinea-Bissau—God help us!—the hope of the world, and he wrote a book titled *The Fortunate Isles* about Cabo Verde under its then-communist government: isles so fortunate, indeed, that half the population emigrated as soon as it was able.

If to be provincial is to be unaware of a world and concerns other than one's own, then Coates is about as provincial as it is possible to be, and it is into this militant provinciality that he seeks to induct his son and, presumably, others. His book is an open letter designed to close minds.

The difference between Baldwin and Coates is evident in their attitudes to religion. One doesn't have to agree with everything Baldwin says to accept that he is not completely simple-minded. Whereas Coates sees religion as nothing but a cloak for exploitation, Baldwin, who sometimes sees it likewise ("Christianity has operated with an unmitigated arrogance and cruelty," the statement of a village atheist), nevertheless acknowledges that "there is still, for me, no pathos quite like the pathos of those multi-colored, worn, somehow triumphant and transfigured faces, speaking from the depths of a visible, tangible continuing despair of the goodness of the Lord." Religion gave these people both a nobility and a means of artistic expression; it assured them of their existential worth at least in the eyes of God; and it instilled in them a sense of personal responsibility. At an early age, Baldwin became a hot-gospeller until he realized the bogusness of his own religious enthusiasm and pseudo-ecstatic experiences, and left the church. However:

In spite of everything, there was in the life I fled a zest and a joy and a capacity for facing and surviving disaster that are very moving and very rare.

Nothing can be worthless that produces such an effect; moreover, the goodness of the people was not unconnected with a sense of personal responsibility that their religion gave:

What others did was their responsibility [wrote Baldwin], for which they would answer when the judgment trumpet sounded. But what I did was my responsibility, and I would have to answer, too—unless, of course, there was also in Heaven a special dispensation for the benighted black, who was not to be judged in the same way as other human beings, or angels.

Coates believes in that special dispensation, albeit a secular one, of which Baldwin speaks but in which Baldwin, who after all wanted to be known as a writer rather than as a black writer, did not believe. On the subject of personal responsibility, Coates has this, and this only, to say:

a great number of educators [his teachers] spoke of “personal responsibility” in a country authored and sustained by a criminal irresponsibility. The point of this language of . . . “personal responsibility” is broad exoneration.

Poor Mr. Coates, he can't really help what he writes: his father was a Black Panther who seems to have chastised him often with his belt. I notice, however, that his skepticism with regard to personal responsibility does not extend to the matter of royalties: he copyrighted his book.

To tell an adolescent by means of quotation marks that personal responsibility is a myth is to corrupt youth, or at any rate to try to do so. I doubt that any message could be more destructive of the group whom Coates claims to represent. The message is so perfectly suited to maintain the social pathology of the ghettos that one suspects that the author does not really want anything to change so that he can maintain his pleasant *ex officio* sense of moral outrage and superiority while at the same time lucratively playing to the

pseudo-guilt of the American liberal intelligentsia which desires the importance and gratification of feeling responsible for everything without having to pay the cost of actually being so. I note, however, that in one respect at least, Coates's example does not follow his precept: where his father had seven children by four different mothers, he (so far) has had one child by one mother to whom he remains married. The fact that he makes slighting reference in the book to babies having babies, which of course he explains away in high ideological fashion, suggests that he does not consider it a good thing, and that he has properly exercised his personal responsibility—possibly without wanting to acknowledge that he has done so. It is a strange world in which one should not only be modest about one's virtues, but positively deny them the better to promote vice.

There is a telling story that he recounts about a black youth killed by a white man in the course of a dispute over the volume of music the youth was playing. In the course of his work as a journalist he took his son, aged thirteen, with him to interview

the mother of a dead black boy. The boy had exchanged hard words with a white man and been killed, because he refused to turn down his music. The killer, having emptied his gun, drove his girlfriend to a hotel. They had drinks. They ordered a pizza. And then the next day, at his leisure, the man turned himself in. The man claimed to have seen a shotgun. . . . No shotgun was ever found, and the killer was convicted not of the boy's murder but of firing repeatedly as the boy's friends tried to retreat.

The detail about the killer going to the hotel with his girlfriend is indeed horrible and suggestive of a disdainful attitude towards his victim, perhaps of having considered him only three-fifths of a full human being. Still, important elements of the story are left out, such as the time, the

place, the circumstances, and even the history of the loud music. In my career as a prison doctor, I saw more than one habitually peaceable person driven to the point of violence by music played loudly by neighbors over weeks or months, and which no appeal to reason, and no request to authorities, had ever lessened (admittedly the perpetrators of the violence didn't carry guns with them).

Be that all as it may, the important aspect of the story is the lesson drawn from it by the author. He writes:

She [the mother] had wanted her son to stand for what he believed and to be respectful. And he had died for believing his friends had a right to play their music loud, and to be American teenagers.

Then the mother addresses Coates's son directly:

You exist. You matter. You have value. You have every right to wear your hoodie, to play your music as loud as you want. You have every right to be you. And no one should deter you from being you. You have to be you. And you can never be afraid to be you.

Much may be forgiven in a mother grieving for a son who was recently shot dead, as was hers, but one does not look to grieving mothers for lessons in political philosophy; grief by itself confers no moral authority. Coates, however, seems to assent to, and certainly does not dissent from, her catechism of inflamed egotism, the very egotism, stupid and worthless, that led to so much of the violence that Coates saw while growing up in Baltimore. You cannot be respectful of others *and* play your music loud. Indeed, nothing is better calculated to demonstrate a lack of respect, and a menacing exercise of power, than music played loudly in the public space. There is no right to loud music except where it does not disturb or inconvenience others. This is so obvious that it should hardly

need saying, but Coates inculcates precisely the opposite lesson in his son. This is staggeringly irresponsible, to put it mildly. Let us hope the son is disobedient.

Coates has a kind of talent, almost genius, for teaching his son (and by extension the world at large) bad lessons:

I am speaking to you as I have always been—as the sober and serious man I have always wanted you to be, who does not apologize for his human feelings.

Let us overlook both the murky grammar and the self-congratulation here (I have ever been a forgiving and compassionate critic); Coates implies that human feelings are always good, as it were self-validating. This is hardly ringing call to self-examination, to say nothing of self-control. No one with the slightest knowledge of the human heart could advocate emotional incontinence as something to aim for.

To go from Baldwin to Coates is to go from the understandably flawed to the opportunistically malign, from the sometimes subtle to the always coarse. Baldwin often exaggerated, but he grew up at a time when, be it remembered, blacks had to go still to the back of a bus and were not admitted to many establishments. Even liberal America had long failed to recognize the scale of the injustice done to and, worse still, the humiliation inflicted upon, the black population. (A correspondent from Alabama, a lady aged seventy and a conservative, tells me that the atmosphere in the small town in which she was raised was exactly that described twenty years earlier in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and that until she was twenty-five—in 1970, hardly a geological eon ago—she had never met an educated black man.) Baldwin came to adulthood at a time before there had been much attempt to repair matters. But his religious background, and perhaps his homosexuality, gave him a depth that allowed him nuance and moderated his

resentment. There is no such moderation in Coates, nor the faintest hint that anything has changed.

Eppur si muove. If this is not recognized, however, the movement henceforth will be in the wrong direction, backwards: and people like Coates will be the motive force of this backward movement, pushing with all their might to the hosannas of liberal intellectuals.

[1](#) *Between the World and Me*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates; Spiegel & Grau, 176 pages, \$24.

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